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Plus Special Guests

Tuesday 29th October 2002

# BETH ORTON

Plus Special Guest ED HARCOURT

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# NME

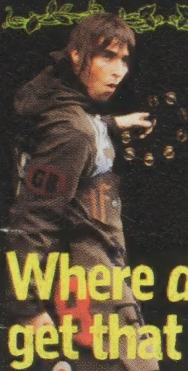
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Where did he  
get that coat?!?

Celebrity fans, awesome  
gigs and a brilliant album

# The Vines

NO WONDER EVERYONE WANTS  
TO SHAG CRAIG NICHOLLS!





The Vines demo arrived in the Heavenly office one Friday afternoon in the early autumn of 2001. Within an hour, we'd mobilised to sign them. Seventeen tracks long, their CD was one of the most complete and fully realised sets of songs that had ever dropped on the label's welcome mat. While some tracks howled with the kind of teenage rage that had fuelled pop music since sixties drugs went bad, others chimed with the kind of celestial melody that made the first Stone Roses album or *Waterpistol* by Shack so gloriously addictive, echoing the times when sixties drugs were very, very good. When the songs from those demos were eventually recorded, over the space of four years and two albums, you realised every transcendent harmony, every yowl, every cymbal smash had been worked out meticulously on that original CD. They were pretty much perfect.

In 2001 there had been a global resurgence in guitar-heavy rock 'n' roll thanks to disparate American outliers The Strokes and The White Stripes. The Vines hailed from Sydney. In the eyes of the music press at that point, New South Wales was as much a cultural backwater as old south Wales had been when Heavenly signed the Manics. The fact that frontman Craig Nicholls would consistently cite Suede (then on the verge of splitting due to ever-decreasing interest from the public) and a pre-stadium Muse as influences only served to lower expectations further. It meant the records and live shows would hugely confound preconceptions.

The Australian three-piece (soon-to-be four piece, though not all the same pieces) signed to Heavenly affiliate label Capitol in the States (with a proviso that Heavenly released in the UK). The UK chose the first single and had two tours before work began in the rest of the world; there was an *NME* cover that declared them 'The Must-See Band of 2002' before anyone else had started working the record. Two years later, the press turned on the band, with a viciousness that went far beyond 'substandard second album'.

Right from the start, Craig's behavior had been erratic. Those around the band put that down to a

prodigious bong habit and an unhealthy appetite for junk food, though neither of those proclivities could explain a temper that regularly saw band members or crew 'sacked', or people in the immediate line of fire physically lashed out at. Over the years, cracks appeared and quickly got wider and wider until eventually Craig was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Life in a touring rock 'n' roll band was pretty much the worst career choice for anyone living with that condition.

By the time of the diagnosis, founding member and perpetual wise counsel Patrick Matthews had left the band on stage during a gig for Triple M radio at Sydney's Annandale Hotel and headed for an easy life. A new line-up of the band made one more album for Heavenly (the brilliant and sadly overlooked *Vision Valley*).

This is a conversation between Patrick, permanently sunny former-Vines guitarist Ryan Griffiths, and the band's long-suffering former manager Andy Kelly. *Robin Turner*

**ANDY KELLY:** The Heavenly experience in the UK was so much fun. I'm glossing over the bits that weren't fun but none of that stuff was due to Heavenly. I remember the very first time I met them. I arrived on the morning of a Doves listening party at the Social [the first playback of *The Last Broadcast*, February 2002]. Robin met me at the door. I'd only ever emailed him at that point, probably one phone call. It was twelve, or eleven in the morning, and Robin said, 'Here you are, I love you. Now let's have a Cocksucking Cowboy.'<sup>1</sup> That was my introduction to Heavenly and I thought, 'This is going to be all right.'

**RYAN GRIFFINS:** They had a few catchphrases. My five-year-old, Isla, says, 'Ello mate.'

**ANDY:** The first show you played at the Brighton Freebutt, no one had seen you. Martin Kelly was down the front shouting, 'She flies!' because you were actually good. We've signed this band and they are good. That became a catchphrase. I think it's even on the back cover of *Highly Evolved*.<sup>2</sup>



**PATRICK MATTHEWS:** Someone suggested that maybe we could talk about the 'serenity in the maelstrom' rather than, I guess, the maelstrom itself.

**ANDY:** I don't remember how much serenity there was. There weren't too many moments of serenity in that Heavenly office.

**PATRICK:** I went to the Social a lot but not to the Heavenly office. James Oldham talked about how they'd have parties at the office that started at 10 a.m. on a Monday. But I missed that. Well, not missed it but...

**ANDY:** You were asleep.

**RYAN:** You were wrapping it up.

**ANDY:** Trying to get a replacement key sorted at the K West Hotel cos you couldn't find your old one.

**PATRICK:** I first met Robin in LA. He came to the Viper Room gig, then came back to LA when Heavenly realised they were going to work with us via Capitol.

**ANDY:** That gig at the Viper Room. I wasn't there but [co-manager] Pete Lusty and Andy Cassell's story was that it was not good and at the end, Andy Slater<sup>3</sup> came up and famously said, 'Start looking at real estate guys.' And then, 'You guys got girlfriends or wives? Ho, ho, man, your lives are about to get REAL interesting.'

**ANDY:** I wish I could remember how the structure of the deal worked. You were signed to [Australian label] Engine Room and they played a big role in how that got divided up. Heavenly had the UK and released before anyone else.

**PATRICK:** Only because you guys, the managers, said, 'We want to go with Heavenly.'

**ANDY:** That would've been the thing about Heavenly. The people were so awesome, so enthusiastic and loved music. They loved you guys so much.

**PATRICK:** Although it didn't occur to me at the time, Heavenly immediately responded to the side of The Vines that wasn't the hard rock. I think Capitol saw 'Active Rock'.

**ANDY:** 'Active Rock' and 'Modern Rock'. You can see why they got Andy Wallace [*Nevermind*] to mix 'Get Free'. Heavenly understood the other influences...

**PATRICK:** And the uniqueness of it.

**ANDY:** And the uniqueness of Craig. They love a frontman in the UK.

**PATRICK:** What if Heavenly had signed us for the world and Capitol weren't involved?

**ANDY:** It would've been different without the Capitol machine. Going into the president's office would've been different... for starters, it wouldn't have been Andy Slater sitting there playing Neil Young on his guitar, getting down.

**PATRICK:** 'Oh sorry, guys, didn't see you there.'

**ANDY:** 'Hey, guys, come in.' 'Er, we've just been waiting out at reception for twenty-five minutes, you knew we were here.' Arguably you wouldn't have sold as many records.

**PATRICK:** We wouldn't have. And we wouldn't have had a Coppola<sup>4</sup> directing a music video. Or David LaChapelle.<sup>5</sup>

**PATRICK:** The flipside of that is we could say, 'What if Heavenly weren't involved?' If it hadn't have been for Heavenly in general, and Robin in particular, none of the things I remember most fondly about London would have happened. We'd have these big nights, and although they were chaotic the conversation was so much better and more organised than if we'd just got pissed with Carl from The Libertines.

**ANDY:** It was great having the Social as a headquarters. Maybe it wasn't serenity in the maelstrom but it was just a tiny bit of sanity. Even though it was total insanity in there.



**PATRICK:** In the UK, the distances we had to travel for shows didn't send Craig mad.

**ANDY:** The crowds were really exciting.

**PATRICK:** The UK was ahead of the US at the start. March/April 2002, we were still doing every interview that Capitol could drum up for us in the US, whereas in England we were way ahead, doing our first *NME* cover to coincide with the first single. When the US got ahead, we got Letterman.<sup>6</sup>

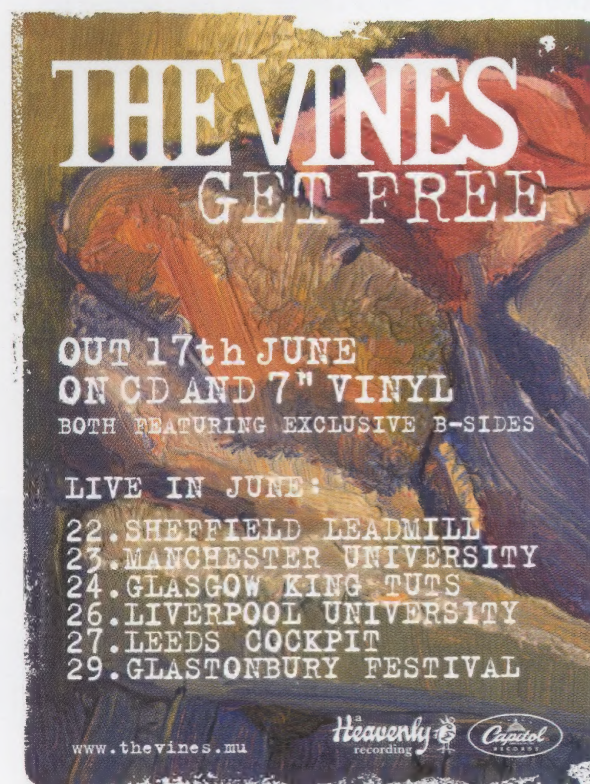
**RYAN:** In London, we really racked up that bill. Robin had something to do with that.

**ANDY:** At the Edgware Road Hilton. It was so much money! Twenty or thirty thousand Australian dollars. There were a few nights where we became the party. First you did a show somewhere with The Libertines and Carl and Pete came back and were up in your room ordering bottles of wine on room service. And the next night there was the huge party in the lobby. You were exceptionally lucky not to be kicked out. Someone who will remain nameless but may have had ties to Heavenly was in the toilet snorting something off the ground when the security guard came in. I was pulled aside by that security guard and he said, 'You are going to have to leave.' My legal defence, your honour, was, 'We have spent SO much money at this hotel I'd really appreciate it if you could overlook it and we'll get our act together.' And they agreed. That was a good night, though.

**PATRICK:** That event was preserved for posterity in my *NME* diary. 'People who shall remain nameless.'

**ANDY:** Yeah, but while we're talking about it, it was Robin. And we love you for that. I'm not sure of your mental state at that time, Ryan, but when you were playing *CD:UK*<sup>7</sup> you came up after a rehearsal and said, 'There's all these, like, machines coming down. I don't know what they are?' And I said, 'Cameras?' You said, 'I don't know.' And I thought to myself, 'Very good thing they're miming.'

**RYAN:** I blame Heavenly.







**ANDY:** My memory of London is totally shaped by being in Soho and going to the Heavenly office. I guess as managers we went to the office more than you guys.

**RYAN:** I reckon it would've been very nice, rocking up there without us.

**ANDY:** There was a great bunch of people there. Spence, he was fantastic. Robin worked basically under a stairwell from what I remember. Martin and Jeff shared an office. There were a lot of people packed in. But it was a lot of fun... It was so different coming from Australia. The Heavenly experience makes you want to retain the fun, the fandom. And that gets harder the longer you do it. Also, all those things that could've been intimidating, like *Top of the Pops*, they just made it more fun. So there was huge pressure but you got insulated from it.

**PATRICK:** That pressure ended up being felt elsewhere too. For example, *NME* drove the hype, put us on the cover, 10-out-of-10 reviews. Then James Oldham interviews us at Coachella, and Craig locks himself in the toilet for hours.<sup>8</sup> We –

the band – didn't think Craig was going to hurt himself, but I'm sure James thought Craig seemed like someone cracking under a lot of pressure, and I think James was definitely having a moment thinking, 'What have I done?'

**ANDY:** He was just in the dressing room at the wrong time. No one could control any of it. Plans are hard enough to make work in rock 'n' roll anyway.

**PATRICK:** A few years later, I said to James, 'We must've been the very last band that you guys anointed the saviours of rock.' And he said, 'Well, there was The Arctic Monkeys.'

**ANDY:** He left before that, though, before The Vines' second album, and it was never the same for The Vines after that at the *NME*.<sup>9</sup>

**PATRICK:** Maybe we should all try to remember the first time Craig threatened to fire us?

**ANDY:** Management wise, he didn't threaten me directly but he did threaten to fire Andy Cassell in LA when you were recording the first album. Andy



had refused to carry his guitar case. That was early on. I don't think I ever got threatened with firing...

**PATRICK:** 'I like you, Andy. I wouldn't do that to you, Andy.'

**ANDY:** I thought that too until he buzzed on the office door in 2008 saying he had a knife collection and he was going to come up and kill us. So that wasn't bad – seven years of not being threatened. I considered the knives to be notice of termination of contract. Were you ever threatened with sacking, Ryan?

**RYAN:** I never got a sacking.

**PATRICK:** I don't think Craig knew how to press your buttons. Unlike Hamish [Rosser, The Vines' drummer]. He was always on about sacking him.

**RYAN:** Whenever there was an issue where he was isolated – self-imposed, invariably – I'd be sent in. I wasn't happy about it. I didn't get threatened in the early days. I actually don't think in Craig's eyes Hamish was ever really in the band.

**ANDY:** He saw him as a contractor. One gig at a time.

**PATRICK:** With me it wasn't that I would be sacked, more he'd tell me that I didn't write the songs. So I didn't get the sack. Until I actually did.

**ANDY:** Well, you left the band in one of the best band-leavings of all time.<sup>10</sup> Just walking off the stage in the middle of a show. And then watching a bit of that show. And I remember you saying, 'That sounds pretty good.'

**PATRICK:** All Hamish. Hamish sounded great.

**ANDY:** For a while, you'd just be watching it hurtle all the way to its ultimate conclusion.

**RYAN:** I remember touring with The Living End<sup>11</sup> and Scott [Owen] saying to me, 'You're lucky it's so unpredictable.'

**ANDY:** It's so funny the view on the other side of the fence. You're just thinking it would be so good to play a tight set every night.

**PATRICK:** Yeah. I remember one time about seven years ago Chris played the wrong chord. It was crazy.

**ANDY:** Thinking about Jeff with regards to you guys, and I remember the first time you played *Later... with Jools Holland*. Craig was wearing a Vines t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and Jeff was like 'He can't wear his own t-shirt! You've got to tell him to change it.' And I was like, 'Ooo... aaa... I can't tell him...'

**PATRICK:** Got to save those moments.

**ANDY:** Got to save myself.

*Opposite and next page: Vines photos taken from Hamish Rosser's personal archive and shot before and around the release of Highly Evolved.*





**RYAN:** Self-preservation.

**ANDY:** If I tell him, he'll wear two Vines t-shirts. One around his head. I don't think Craig wearing his own merch was Jeff's preference. I can't remember if that was the same *Later*...

– because you played it twice – as when between songs Craig was crawling around under the stage. One time Lou Reed was on. And he liked it.<sup>12</sup> There was definitely one where Craig was crawling around under the stage.

**PATRICK:** The second one Jools had Nick Hornby sitting at a little table where he would sit down and interview him, and so he's quite close to the action and he was looking worried.

**ANDY:** Rightfully so. That's that thing I was talking about, people would be watching you and be genuinely scared.

**PATRICK:** Well, he [Nick Hornby] was in harm's way.

**ANDY:** He was.

**PATRICK:** And I don't think Craig had read *High Fidelity* at that point.

**ANDY:** Not at that point. He later went on to read it and say it was one of his favourite books in the music genre.

**ANDY:** What was Craig's relationship with Heavenly?

**PATRICK:** Robin calmed Craig down a lot because he was so entertaining.

**ANDY:** Yep, loved Robin.

**PATRICK:** Quick fire.

**ANDY:** Robin and Stu from EMI.

**PATRICK:** From Robin's perspective, he probably didn't realise that, because Craig would still be acting crazy. Same thing with Rob Sheffield, who interviewed us for the *Rolling Stone* cover.

Rob definitely kept Craig calm. He was happy to just talk, but Rob thought he was making him demented because all Craig would do in the interview was smoke bongs and talk about The Strokes and The White Stripes.

**ANDY:** But that was Craig on a good day – that was his good place. He's talking about his interests, he's performing his favourite leisure activity.

**PATRICK:** No food was thrown.

**ANDY:** There weren't too many writers who could do that. So Rob did pretty well there. And Robin.

**PATRICK:** But the converse... Andy Slater thought he was probably really helping Craig out by talking to him, really helping Craig reach a creative plateau.

**ANDY:** Probably until that time he came on the tour bus in Milan that night and Craig called him 'a devil man'.<sup>13</sup>

**RYAN:** I had a friend on the bus – he still talks about it. He couldn't believe that Craig would talk to the president of the record company that way.

**ANDY:** So, Robin, good influence on Craig. I suppose now is the right time to ask if you wouldn't mind coming out to Australia and helping Craig out with the rest of his life.

**PATRICK:** Talk shit with Craig for half an hour every morning.

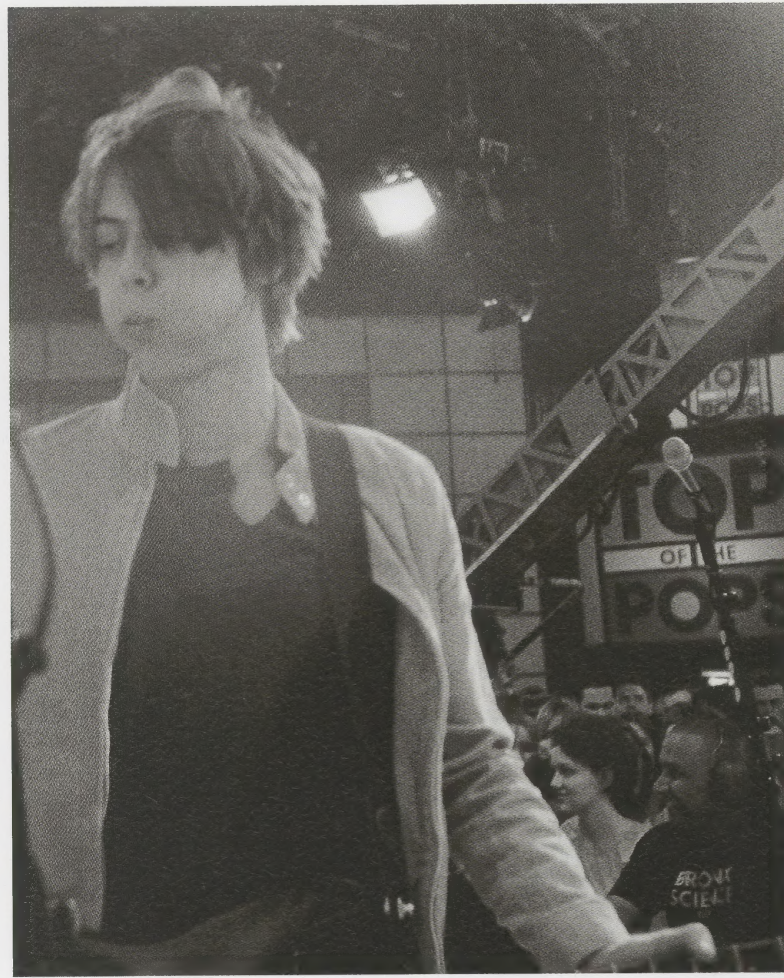
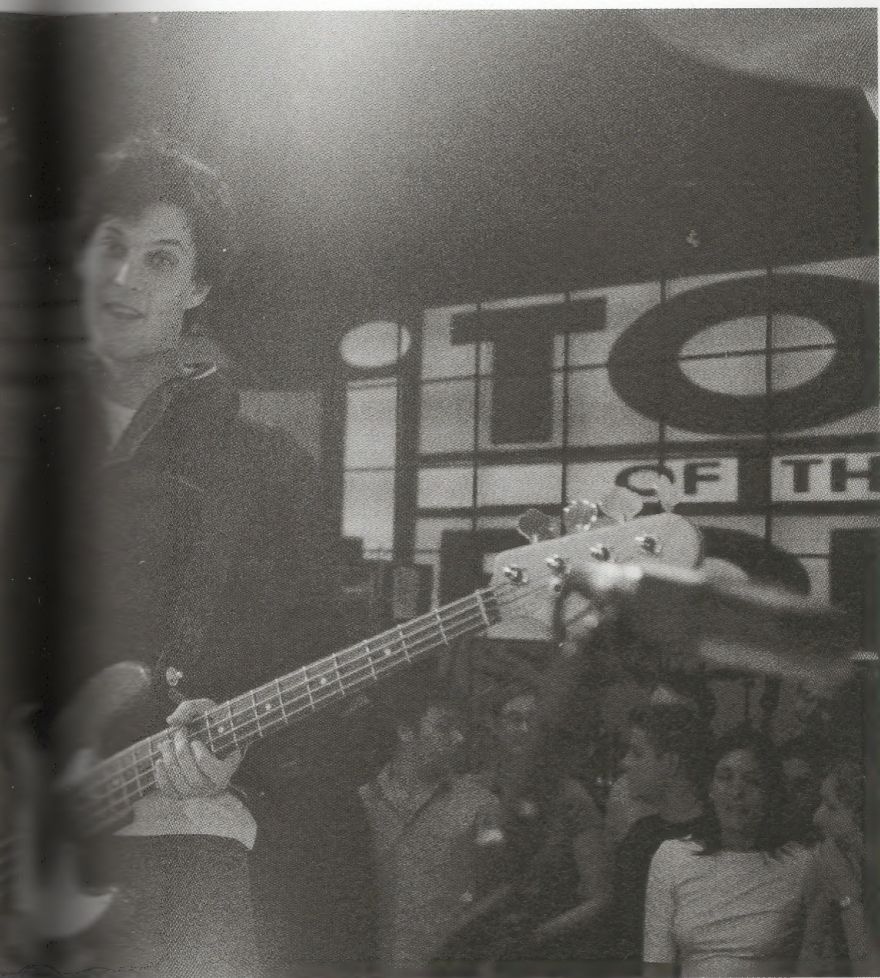
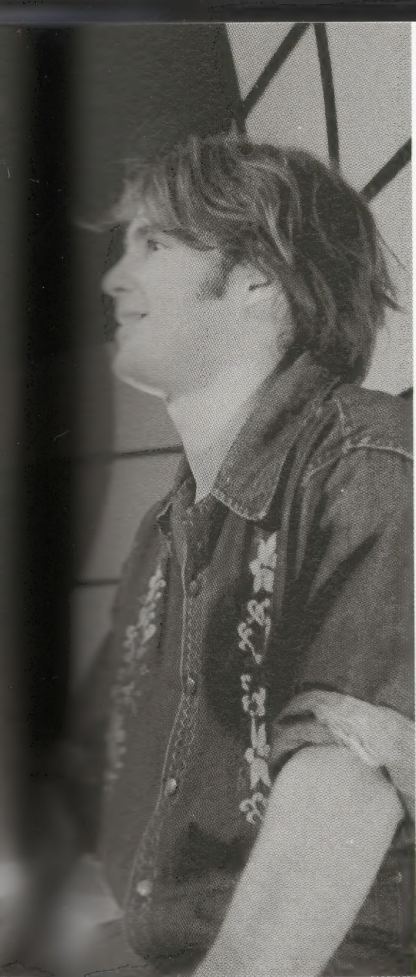
**ANDY:** Listen to Suede and Muse, two of Robin's favourite bands.

**RYAN:** Robin would've been the closest to Craig across any label. Band members, management [laughs].

**PATRICK:** He was rock 'n' roll.

**ANDY:** Well, just the good parts.







**1** A shot made up of Baileys poured over butterscotch schnapps. Not a sex act.

**2** The Vines' debut show in the UK was on 5 March 2002, in Brighton. James Oldham, reviewing for *NME* on 16 March 2002: 'This is one of the most sensational debut gigs that your correspondent has ever seen. Without question, The Vines are going to be this year's Strokes. A few more gigs like tonight and they might even turn out to be a whole lot more.' It wasn't only *NME*. The *Guardian* gave \*\*\*\* for the London show: 'It's like listening to all your favourite bands at once' (Betty Clarke). When the album arrived four months later, *NME* wrote: '*Highly Evolved* is the sort of shiver-down-the spine debut that gets you thinking that if The Strokes were the John the Baptists of rock then just maybe ... No pressure, mind.'

**3** Andy Slater was president of Capitol Records from 2001 to 2007. Slater previously managed artists like Macy Gray, Fiona Apple and The Wallflowers. One of Slater's first signings to Capitol were Chicago band OK Go, who were in the studio next door to The Vines at Sunset Sound Factory in mid-2001. *The Face*, cover feature, January 2003: 'About three weeks into the [Vines'] sessions at Sunset Sounds Factory, Andy Slater, president of Capitol Records, bumped into Craig in a narrow corridor. He was so intrigued, he made it is his duty that day to listen in on The Vines recording. 'I was at the studio, this kid walked in and he had this immediate presence,' he told the *Los Angeles Times*. 'He wasn't looking at anything in particular, just wandering around the studio kinda looking at the air. Sometimes artists are tapped into some other dimension that enables them to articulate things we want to say but sometimes can't. He felt like someone who was tapped in.'

**4** Roman Coppola directed the video for 'Get Free'.

**5** Directed the video for 'Outtathaway' and shot cover and feature for *The Face*, January 2003.

**6** The Vines played the *Late Show with David Letterman* on 19 August 2002. Reading from his teleprompter David Letterman introduced them matter-of-factly: 'Our next guests are an acclaimed rock 'n' roll band from Australia. Their debut CD is entitled *Highly Evolved*. Here they are, kids, The Vines.' At the end of a frankly deranged performance that ended with Craig in the drum kit, Letterman smiled his gap-toothed grin broadly and shouted (over guitar feedback) to his sidekick, Shaffer: 'How 'bout that? Is he all right, Paul?' 'Can't say,' said Paul Shaffer. 'Can't say for sure.' 'The Vines,' said Dave. 'We'll be right back, everybody.' The CBS Orchestra broke into the Australian sixties band The Easybeats' 'Friday on My Mind' and The Vines left the stage. When the show came back from the break Paul said, 'I hope they're not neglecting their studies.'

**7** The Vines played *CD:UK* on Saturday, 6 April 2002. Patrick in the *NME.com* diary: '[*CD:UK*] was mental. When we left, all these kids were screaming and rushing up to our limo with tinted windows. When they peered in and discovered we weren't the Sugababes, I think they were disappointed.'

**8** *NME*, 'Why The Vines Are The Must-See Band of 2002': '[Craig] starts to say that when he was seventeen he seriously thought about

killing himself. "I thought it might make things easier ..." Craig starts hyperventilating: "Look, I can't do this ..." He heads to the toilet and locks the door. We tell the band about his panic attack, they barely look up. Ryan just says, "Don't worry about it. He does this sort of thing all the time."

**9** Paul Moody praised *Winning Days* in a profile for the *NME* saying it was better than The Strokes: '... it is *NME*'s solemn duty to report that the results are truly startling. Forget any notions of a *Room on Fire* holding pattern or, as Patrick claimed to *NME*, a 'part-metal album', it's the perfect reflection of their schizophrenic live shows.' Sadly, the album review in *NME* wasn't written by Paul Moody. They panned the album, giving it 5/10, saying the band were actually much worse than The Strokes. '... In following up their classic debuts Oasis went supersonic with (*What's the Story*) *Morning Glory*? while, in contrast, The Strokes refined their sound for *Room on Fire*, *Winning Days* does neither. It retreads the same terrain as its predecessor without getting anywhere near its heights. *Highly Evolved*? *Winning Days* is anything but.'

**10** *Rolling Stone* (Australian edition), June 2004: 'The drama started during the opener, "Outtathaway", when Nicholls kicked out and connected with a photographer from a local paper. Nicholls then leapt into the crowd and reportedly had an altercation with some fans. When he returned to the stage, Patrick Matthews put down his bass and walked off, leaving the band to play as a trio. Nicholls then squealed through songs, making little effort to sing. At one point he mocked the crowd, calling them sheep.'

**11** The Vines toured the US in 2004 with fellow Australian bands Jet and The Living End as support. The tour was called 'The Aussie Invasion Tour'. Reviews of The Vines' live show were scathing. *New York Post*: 'Jet outstripped The Vines on every count, from performance to production to personality ... It was sad that Jet, which had the encore-demanding cheers, wasn't given the time to return to the stage, while The Vines, who did do an encore, did it because of ceremony.' *New York Times* (Kelefa Sanneh): 'Last year (was it only last year?), when The Vines first arrived in the United States, they were celebrated as retro-rock saviours, but they're really alternative-rock scavengers, borrowing bits and pieces from Nirvana, Oasis, Blur and others. Next week The Vines will release their second album, *Winning Days* (Capitol), a rather tired-sounding collection of rehashed rave-ups and risible pseudo-psychedelia. The album achieves nothing more than hard-rock competence. Their concert often achieved less.'

**12** The Vines played *Later ... with Jools Holland* on 19 April 2002 with Del Amitri, Susana Baca, Stereophonics and Badly Drawn Boy. Then again on 16 April 2003 with Lou Reed, Goldfrapp, Kings of Leon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Stephanie McKay (and Nick Hornby). In Jools's interview with Lou Reed on the 2003 show Lou points to Craig and says: 'Boy, if he lives long enough it'll be great.' Jools says, 'That fighting with the drum kit, that really is a thing, isn't it?' and Lou says: 'Hey, I want him to do it ten times in a row ... It made me feel good to see that. The spirit lives.'



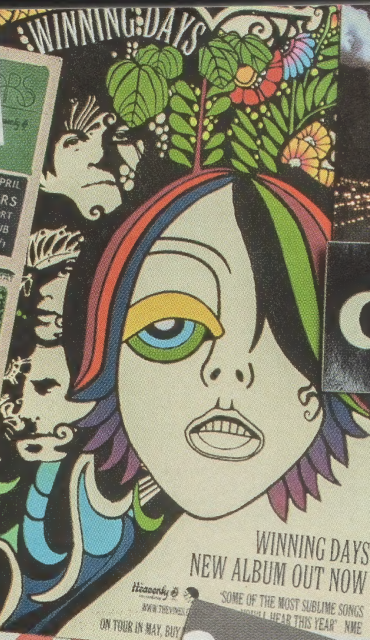
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